

# Textile Traditions and Fashion Education in Mexico

Thomai Thessalia Papathanasiou and Alessandra Perlatti

## Introduction

Mesoamerican textile weaving reflects a continuous history of interpretation based on ancient, historic, and modern ideologies and techniques. The textiles that are found in museums and private collections and among the indigenous people of Mesoamerica, where the ancient art of weaving continues today, are significant resources of information. (Klein, 1997, 1)

The richness of textile traditions in Mexico is worldly recognized. Mesoamerican cultures are still alive nowadays in different parts of the country, and cultural heritage still survives among the indigenous peoples who inhabit modern Mexico. One of the strongest features of these cultures are their weaving, dyeing, embroidering, and looming techniques.

Textile traditions, combined with craftsmanship, music, and dance are the foundation of popular culture in Mexico. Although popular culture has always been seen as trivial and of a lower level when compared to high culture, it provides the best way to detect and recognize a collective state of mind and the lifestyle of a particular society. It is through popular culture that we can more easily identify the colors, smells, sounds, and normative behavior of a community.

Modern Mexican fashion designers nowadays therefore face a great challenge to find an in-between place where they can celebrate their cultural roots and at the same time create cutting edge designs. How can they honor indigenous craftsmanship without producing a folkloric garment? How can they use traditional textiles and shapes without

creating traditional costume? How can we be true to our traditions and ourselves, and be modern and relevant at the same time?

As fashion and textile design educators, we firmly believe that the only way to have a strong sense of cultural identity is to understand and honor our traditions, and the preservation of traditional techniques is fundamental for establishing the foundation of contemporary Mexican style, as Klein (1997) points out:

The creative application of new ideas and techniques in textile weaving is based on the maintenance of cultural foundations of tradition. For instance, although a weaver today may want to incorporate a new brocaded motif or perhaps even copy an old one into a weaving, if the weaver does not know how to make the structure for the backstrap loom, it will not be possible to materially produce this type of textile—let alone an innovative motif. ... If an ancient technology such as backstrap weaving is not maintained or is replaced by something else, such as factory-made reproductions of indigenous fabrics, then not only does the material culture or object itself disappear but the entire foundation for a cultural tradition disappears along with it. (p. 3)

With a growing number of design schools, international partnerships, and government incentives, the quest for high standards in both manufacture and concept is ever intensifying. As Guillermo Garcia (as cited in Abnett, 2014), the director of ProMexico, a Mexican Government institution in charge of strengthening Mexico's participation in the international economy, states:

The main challenge we are working with now is that there are misconceptions about what Mexico is doing in terms of design. We want to bring foreign buyers to Mexico to get them to know not only the final product, but the quality, the shops, the training, universities and design centers.

These ideas are a few of the many reasons why textile and fashion design education at the University of Monterrey is looking for ways to bring traditions to our students' life in 'Textile Traditions and Fashion Education in Mexico' by Thomai Thessalia Papathanasiou and Alessandra

the contemporary world. Our university is located in Monterrey, a large industrial city in northern Mexico that is closer to Texas than any other parts of the country, and is rich in traditional and indigenous cultures. With the support of the Museo Textil de Oaxaca, we organized a workshop about weaving on a frame loom, which is an ancient practice from the Zapotec culture and the number-one source of income of the village called Teotitlán del Valle in the state of Oaxaca, from which our professor and the instructor of this workshop, Mr. Prócoro Ruiz Gutiérrez, were originally.

The aim of the workshop was for students and professors of the Fashion and Textile Design Department to learn more about the rich tradition of textiles in the south of the country and inspire them to implement them in their designs. In the past, field trips have been organized to the state of Oaxaca where students had the opportunity to see how the Zapotecs create their textiles and learn traditional embroidery techniques. However this was the first time we organised this type of weaving workshop at the university.

## **Zapotec Textiles**

Teotitlán del Valle is a village located about 31 km from Oaxaca City, the capital of the Oaxaca state in Mexico. It was founded in 1465, and it is said to be the first village to be established by the Zapotecs (Vive Oaxaca, 2011).

Weaving is the primary income-earning activity for about 68% of the active population of Teotitlán del Valle (Stephen, 2005). The artisans use mainly three tools: 1) waist looms that have been used since the Pre-Hispanic Era (950-1521 A.D.); 2) mechanic pedal looms that were incorporated during the Colonial Era (1526-1821 A.D.); and 3) frame looms that are used by many different indigenous groups for textile production. The loom typically used by the Zapotecs is similar to looms used throughout Mexico which are known as treadle looms, upright looms, Spanish floor looms, and Mexican tapestry looms. For the purposes of this workshop the frame loom was used.

The weavers of Teotitlán and their textiles have a special connection to the Pre-Hispanic past and association connected to Pre-Hispanic culture. They work in pure wool, in natural colors from different plants, animals, and minerals that have been used

'Textile Traditions and Fashion Education in Mexico' by Thomai Thessalia Papathanasiou and Alessandra

Perlatti

since Pre-Hispanic times. The most typical means are: 1) the cochineal, a parasite found on the nopal cactus, for red hues; 2) the indigo plant to obtain blue hues; 3) the pericon plant to achieve yellow hues; and 4) the violet sea snail from which purple pigment is obtained.

The Zapotec textiles (Figure 1) are colorful and come in a variety of sizes; however, the most common width is one meter. The variety of sizes is because of the different sizes of looms that they use and also because they create their textiles for different uses such as tapestries, carpets, decorative elements. Some textiles have geometric shaped designs while others have central diamond-shaped motifs or feature Pre-Hispanic-looking figures. The designs and motifs serve to differentiate ethnic groups and individual classes inside the communities. There are different types of motifs such as geometric, anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, cosmological, and plants. These motifs are embedded with symbolism, as Tiffany (2004) points out, a “Zapotec textile has many stories embedded in the threads of its warp and woof” (p. 312). For example, the zigzag lines are associated with thunderstorms and, therefore, rain; the meanders symbolize the life cycle of an ordinary person.



Figure 1. Zapotec Textiles produced in Teotitlán del Valle. Photograph: Thomai Papathanasiou.

Zapotecs see the design, or at least geometric patterns, in terms of rectangular and triangular blocks of colors that are, in turn, built up out of narrow stripes of color. They do not lay designs in either centimeters or inches rather by blocks of color.

The actual work of weaving on the loom is only a small part of the production of a Zapotec textile. Many processes must be undertaken before one can begin to weave. The artisans need to calculate the necessary amount of threads for the warp depending on the width of the textile and the designs. Then attaching the warp to the loom is a time-consuming job (Wood, 2008). Zapotecs prepare the loom by thinking in terms of blocks of color for the designs that they are going to weave and they know the designs by memory.

By the end of the 1940s, the completion of the Pan-American Highway, which is only five kilometers away from Teotitlán del Valle, resulting in an increase of tourism and a high demand for handcrafts (Wood, 2000; Tiffany, 2004). That is when the textile tradition of the Zapotecs crossed the borders and started being appreciated by foreigners.

The prices of the textiles vary depending on the colors (if it is red dyed from cochineal it is more expensive) and the level of complexity of the design which makes its required weaving time differ. “In reality crafts in Mexico aren’t expensive. There’s a lot of work involved, really, for the artisan in order to sell his products.” (Wood, 2008, p. 59)

The Mexican government and private initiatives established associations to support the artisans in Oaxaca. Contests were launched so as to stimulate their creativity, since part of the evaluation criteria is the presentation of new elements in their work. Artisans have used as sources of inspiration specialized publications of museums, texts about archaeology, and the codex of Pre-Hispanic groups.

### **Day-to-day Activities of the Workshop**

The workshop took place over four days at the Textile Laboratory of Centro Roberto Garza Sada, the building that houses the Art, Architecture, and the Design Division of Universidad de Monterrey, located in San Pedro Garza García, Nuevo León, from Wednesday March 8<sup>th</sup> to Saturday March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017, were four sessions, the duration of which was three hours. The sessions were dedicated to learning the basic weaving techniques used by the Zapotec artisans in order to create their textiles.

Fourteen undergraduate students (six first year, three second year, one third year, and four fourth year) and four professors of the Textile and Fashion Design Department participated. The instructor was Prócoro Ruiz Gutiérrez, an artisan who lives and works in Teotitlán del Valle in his family workshop. He collaborates with the Textile Museum in Oaxaca giving classes at the museum, and is a member of the cooperative that exists in the town.

During the first session, the instructor provided each participant with a frame loom, cotton yarn in a natural color, and a comb. The first thing he taught the participants was how to use the cotton yarn to warp the loom. After all the members of the group had finalized this first step, the artisan showed everyone how to weave the initial lines of the textile with the same cotton yarn in order to ensure the tension and width of the textile. He proceeded with presenting wool yarn in different colors available for the participants to freely choose, and explained how wool is nowadays purchased in Mexico City and then dyed in Teotitlán del Valle with its traditional natural methods. He then demonstrated how basic weaving is done by passing the yarn under one string of yarn of the warp and then over the next one.

At the beginning of the second session, the workshop instructor explained how important it was to weave string by string and to use fingers to keep the weave so tight that the cotton yarn warp is not visible in the textile and only the colored wool yarns can be seen and create designs and motifs. He also explained that there should not be too much tension given to the wool yarn so as to maintain the width of the textile and not to break the delicate yarn. Nevertheless, in the case of broken yarn there is an easy way to continue weaving without leaving a visible trace in the design of the textile: the yarn used to weave is hand spinned, so you can easily mix and hand spin it with another yarn. After all the members of the group had woven a few lines with one color, the instructor asked them to pick a second color for their textile and explained how to create the first and easiest pattern that gives a stripe effect (Figure 2). Since the participants advanced at different paces, the instructor would check the progress and give guidance accordingly (Figure 3). After the stripe pattern, the instructor asked the participants to choose a third color in order to create the next design. In this case the design was to divide the warp in three even parts and weave each section with a different color. This helped create a line consisted of three different blocks of colors (Figures 4 and 5).





Figure 2. Process of weaving. Photograph: Alessandra Perlatti.





Figure 3. The instructor shows a student how to improve her weave. Photograph: Alessandra Perlatti.

In the third session, the instructor indicated that participants were to choose two colors again and demonstrated how to weave a diagonal motif. He reviewed the progress of each participant and made suggestions if any adjustment was needed. The ones who had been behind had the opportunity to catch up with the advancement of the rest of the group.

Although the form of weaving is very similar to other ones, what makes the textiles developed unique are the motifs and designs created. The professor explained how to weave the diagonal motif so that it could be used as a basis in order to create more complex designs.



Figure 4. Students weaving on their frame loom. Photograph: Alessandra Perlatti.

In the fourth and final sessions, the instructor gave feedback on the work accomplished and provided guidance on how to improve the technique. Before the 'Textile Traditions and Fashion Education in Mexico' by Thomai Thessalia Papathanasiou and Alessandra



session was over, he presented more wool yarn in different hues than the ones that had been used in the duration of the course. The yarn was offered so that participants could create their own designs based on the techniques that they had been taught.



Figure 5. Patterns created by the different techniques taught during the workshop. Photograph: Alessandra Perlatti.

## **Reflection on the Workshop and Design Task Assigned after the Workshop**

Since none of the participants were familiar with traditional Zapotec weaving and the duration of the workshop was only four days, we were uncertain of the capability of everyone to learn the techniques and to manage the weaving of a small textile sample of good quality in a short time. However, the results were satisfying as everybody was able to produce their own woven textile. After the workshop, the 14 participating students were assigned to create an original design on the frame loom within three weeks. We choose a theme for the designs: “Mexicans learning from Mexicans” and the final sample should measure 15 by 15 centimeters. We provided the yarn in eight colors: black, white, yellow, brown, beige and three different shades of grey, and the students were free to choose from this selection. In only three weeks the students were able to create original designs based on the basic techniques knowledge they acquired during the workshop (Figure 6).





Figure 6. Some examples of the projects that the students Amanda Guardado, Mónica Narváez, Melissa Molina, and Beatriz Cárdenas developed after the workshop using the frame loom techniques.

Photograph: Alessandra Perlatti.

After the final delivery, we interviewed all the students who participated in the workshop and completed their woven designs. All of them commented that they were motivated to participate in the workshop because they wanted to learn a new technique. The 4th year students had already taken a Weaving and Knitting class during which

they learn the commonly used weaving techniques such as twill, satin, jacquard. For the other students it was their first weaving experience. They all believed that it was a positive experience for them and that they have acquired a new useful skill as designers. One of the participants, Alejandra Vega López, 1st year student mentioned: “I really like to know that with my bare hands and natural materials I can create from scratch different designs and transform something artisanal and traditional into contemporary and modern design” (A. Vega L., personal communication, April 4th 2017).

One of the most positive outcomes was the appreciation for artisanal work and the value that the students were starting to acknowledge traditional textiles that are so many times perceived as cheap or trivial here in Mexico. One of the main reasons for us to bring this kind of workshop into the University was to open our eyes to the reality of Mexico, in which so many talented artisans are working and surviving from their trade, and we should be part of the movement that changes the perception on the value of their work. Amanda Guardado Lomelí, 4th year student commented: “It was heartbreaking to see the amount the hard work they put into their products and realize how cheap they sell those products, we should put more value on their work” (A. Guardado L., personal communication, April 19th 2017). She also believed that Mexico has a lot to give and that the textile tradition is rich and beautiful and should be taken care of. Another student, Camila Gallegos Aviña , 1st year student, mentioned that she realized how much effort the artisans put into their work and how hard it actually is to apply these techniques (C. Gallegos A., personal communication, April 5th 2017). Melissa Molina Barrientos , 1st year student believed that it [artisanal work] helped her see and appreciate different cultures and textile arts which are not often valued and that really require a lot of work, effort and dedication (M. Molina B., personal communication, April 4th 2017).

The correlation between Mexican culture and traditional textile techniques was one of the most commented points of the experience. Alejandra Vega López commented that “Traditional textiles are an important of the Mexican culture, and since Mexico has such beautiful artisanal textiles, I feel that it is important that we learn these techniques so we don’t lose them” (A. Vega L., personal communication, April 4th 2017).

‘Textile Traditions and Fashion Education in Mexico’ by Thomai Thessalia Papathanasiou and Alessandra

A subject of discussion was about collaboration between artisans and designers, and what the students think about working together with artisans, what kind of role they would have on their designs and projects, and their opinion on the future of Mexican fashion industry. The way the students expressed themselves revealed their view concerning the importance of keeping in touch with their Mexican roots and valuing the resources of the country. More specifically, Diana Lucia Guadiana Cantú, 1st year student, commented: “As a designer I want to transmit through my designs the Mexican pride and make people feel proud of their roots and their culture. Mexican handwork is amazing (and we are very hard workers)” (D. L. Guadiana C., personal communication, April 4th 2017). She continued to say that she believed that more designers are incorporating the textile traditions into their creations, working with artisans. Astrid Almaguer Salazar, 2nd year student, believed that there is a bright future for Mexican fashion and that she hoped that the public would recognize the excellent work the designers do (A. Almaguer S., personal communication, April 7th 2017). Another student, Janna Garcia Jimenez, 2nd year student, highlighted that due to the political climate surrounding Mexico currently, it is the moment to value what there is in the country and the great work of the artisans (J. Garcia J., personal communication, April 7th 2017). Beatriz Cardenas Garza, 4th year student, said: “the Mexican fashion industry is growing a lot, there’s a lot of people behind this industry and I think that textile traditions are important to understand the past and create the future” (B. Cárdenas G., personal communication, April 26th 2017).

We ended the conversation by discussing their viewpoints on how the traditional techniques would affect on their work as designers and what their approach would be on the subject with regard to the industry they have already worked with. Alejandra Vega López believes that it is important for the future of Mexican fashion to conserve the traditional textile techniques that characterize the culture, but it is important to give them a creative turn to look modern and innovative in the industry (A. Vega L., personal communication, April 4th 2017). Paulina Pérez, 4th year student, said: “I feel that every time it’s taking more importance to the emerging designers the use of traditional techniques, it adds more value to the items” (P. Pérez, personal communication, April 7th 2017). María Eliza Castro Diaz, 1st year student, mentioned that it is important to



keep the textile traditions and learn because they are cultural heritage and she feels that since not all fashion students have this knowledge she has an advantage (M. E. Castro D., personal communication, April 6th 2017).

## **Conclusion**

Taking into account the students' reflections obtained in the interviews and the design projects, it appears that young Mexican fashion designers appreciate and are completely open to learning from artisans. They are interested in combining traditional methods with a contemporary vision to create a fresh outlook for the Mexican fashion industry. Contemporary Mexican fashion designers such as Francisco Cancino with his brand Yakampot and Carla Fernández are using the textile traditions of different regions of the country in their highly praised collections. Both designers are very well-known and appreciated on a national and international level.

Two of the students are currently developing textiles from recycled pieces of fabric using the frame loom and the weaving technique they learnt during the workshop for their graduate collection. We are hoping to see more students applying their knowledge in order to create collections that combine tradition with contemporary design.

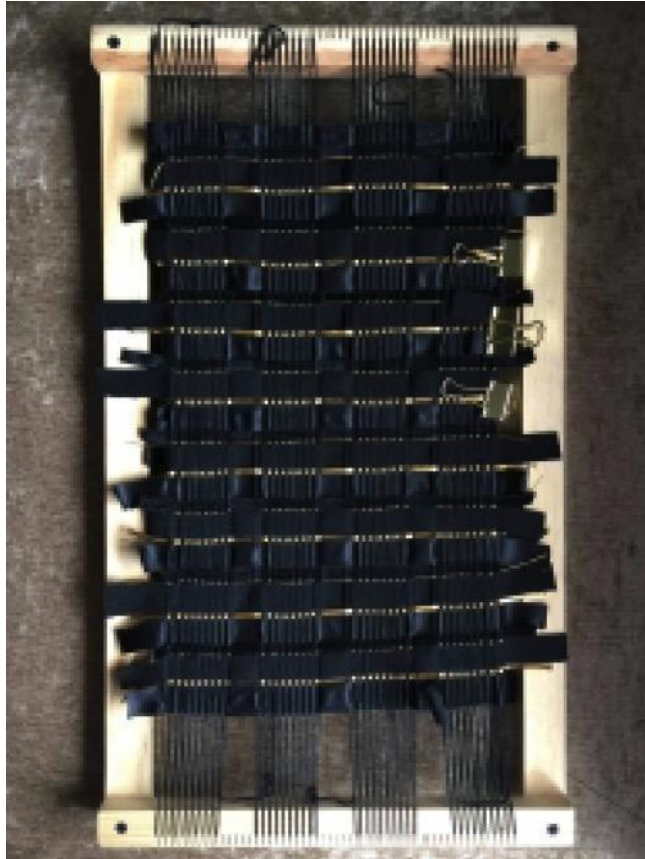


Figure7. Using the frame loom and the weaving technique to create textiles from recycled pieces of fabric.  
Photograph: Amanda Guardado Lomeli.

As fashion and textile design educators, the experience was equally significant to us, because we had an opportunity to learn those techniques and to have a close interaction with the professor-artisan. Starting this semester in the Weaving and Knitting class, which is compulsory for all the Fashion and Textile Design Students, the frame loom technique is being incorporated. All students will have the opportunity to learn how to weave in this form and we are hoping that this will help increase their interest. One of our proudest moments was a phone call we received from the professor right after we shared the pictures of our students' projects with him. He was really emotional about it, because he was unsure of how much the students learnt from him and he told us that seeing these projects he could open his eyes to how much he and his community could still learn about the technique that they learnt from their fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers.

## References

- Abnett, K. (2014). *Below The Border*. Retrieved from [http://www.notjustalabel.com/editorial/below\\_the\\_border](http://www.notjustalabel.com/editorial/below_the_border)
- Hernández-Díaz, J., & Zafra, G. (2005). *Artesanas y artesanos: creación, innovación y tradición en la producción de artesanías* [Artisans: Creation, innovation and tradition in the production of crafts]. México D.F.: Plaza y Valdés.
- Klein, K. (1997). Conservation and cultural identity. In K. Klein (Ed.), *The unbroken thread: Conserving the textile traditions of Oaxaca* (pp. 1–21). Los Angeles, CA: The Getty Conservation Institute.
- Serros Mrkusic, C. (2010). *El textil como identidad en la indumentaria indígena Oaxaqueña* [Textiles as identity in the indigenous Oaxacan costume] (Unpublished Master's thesis). Buenos Aires: Universidad de Palermo. Retrieved from [http://fido.palermo.edu/servicios\\_dyc/proyectorgraduacion/archivos/771.pdf](http://fido.palermo.edu/servicios_dyc/proyectorgraduacion/archivos/771.pdf)
- Stephen, L. (2005). Women's weaving cooperatives in Oaxaca: An indigenous response to neoliberalism. *Critique of Anthropology*, 25(3), 253–278.  
doi:10.1177/0308275x05055215
- Tiffany, S. W. (2004). “Frame That Rug!”: Narratives of Zapotec Textiles as Art and Ethnic Commodity in the Global Marketplace. *Visual Anthropology*, 17(3–4), 293–318. doi:10.1080/08949460490468054
- Vive Oaxaca (2011), Teotitlan del Valle, Tlacolula, Oaxaca, Retrieved from <http://www.viveoaxaca.org/2011/08/teotitlan-del-valle-tlacolula-oaxaca.html>
- Wood, W. W. (2000). Flexible production, households, and fieldwork: Multisited Zapotec weavers in the era of late capitalism. *Ethnology*, 39(2), 133–148.  
doi:10.2307/3773840
- Wood, W. W. (2008). *Made in Mexico: Zapotec weavers and the global ethnic art market*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.